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## THE NEW ENGLAND THEOLOGIANS

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It may be doubted whether any corner of earth, unless it be Scotland, has ever had so metaphysically minded a clergy as New England. The eighteenth-century New England divines, commencing with Edwards, were ardent, and some of them very acute, metaphysicians.

### I

The New England theology was chiefly concerned with three great issues—all fundamentally metaphysical and to some extent ethical—arising out of the effort to square the Calvinistic system with the demands of rational and moral thinking. The first of these was the issue between sovereignty and benevolence; the second, that between determinism and freedom; the third, that between total depravity and true virtue. These issues appeared and reappeared in their sermons and writings with what seems to us wearisome persistence—a form, doubtless, of the perseverance of the saints. All of these problems, although not raised *de novo* by Jonathan Edwards, profoundest of American thinkers, were thrust upon the American people by his eager and speculative mind.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards left a yawning chasm between his extreme Calvinistic interpretation of the doctrine of sovereignty (including divine decrees) and his representation of God as benevolence—a gulf of which he himself seemed strangely oblivious. It was the task of his pupils and friends, Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins and their successors, to relate and if possible reconcile these contradictory doctrines which Edwards himself treated as if they were

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards was born at East Windsor, Conn., in 1703; was graduated from Yale College in 1720; pastor at Northampton, Mass., 1727–50; missionary to the Indians at Stockbridge, 1750–58; president of Princeton College from 1758 till his death in the same year. See the biography by A. V. G. Allen, also the invaluable article, “Jonathan Edwards’ Idealism,” by Professor E. C. Smyth in the *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. I, No. 4.

entirely harmonious. "Why not harmonious?" Edwards would doubtless have asked. "May there not be a benevolent sovereign?" Possibly, it might be replied, but not if that sovereign elects the greater part of his subjects to eternal damnation for no other reason than his own inscrutable pleasure. Nor can a sovereign be readily regarded as benevolent who has decreed a world-order of which sin and suffering and death are predetermined constituents.

Joseph Bellamy<sup>1</sup> endeavored to meet such objections as these in his daring treatise, *The Wisdom of God in the Permission of Sin* (1758), in which he advanced the New England counterpart of Leibnitzian optimism, i.e., that this is the best possible of worlds and that God decreed sin for the reason that in the end it will bring "the greatest good to the greatest number." Samuel Hopkins<sup>2</sup> took much the same position in his tract, *Sin through the Divine Interposition an Advantage to the Universe* (1759), in which he declared that "God's greatest and most glorious work is to bring good out of evil . . . to make sin in general, which is the greatest evil, the means of the greatest good."<sup>3</sup>

Nothing could excel the boldness with which these two New England optimists advanced and upheld these daring propositions. But it was an impossible position and gradually underwent a large degree of modification, especially at the hands of N. W. Taylor, who held that "such is the nature of *free agency* that God could not wholly prevent its perversion."<sup>4</sup> In fact, "He has been crossed and thwarted" by sin.<sup>5</sup>

God may be supposed to purpose an event—i.e., to purpose that it *shall be* and to prefer that it *should be*—which is not the necessary means of the greatest conceivable good, but which is wholly evil in its nature, tendencies, and relations

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Bellamy, born in Cheshire, Conn., February 20, 1719; was graduated at Yale College, 1735; studied with Edwards at Northampton, 1736; pastor at Bethlehem, Conn., 1740 till his death in 1790; D.D., Aberdeen University, 1768.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Hopkins, born in Waterbury, Conn., September 17, 1721; was graduated at Yale College, 1741; studied with Edwards; pastor at Great Barrington, Mass., 1743-69; Newport, R.I., 1770 till his death, December 20, 1803.

<sup>3</sup> F. H. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 131. Professor Foster's history is the one thorough and adequate history of this notable school of theology.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> *Moral Government*, II, 14.

because the evil is unavoidably incidental (so far as His power is concerned) to that system which is the necessary means of the highest conceivable and highest actual good, it being true at the same time that He can bring so much good out of the evil that the actual result will be the greatest good which He can secure.<sup>1</sup>

This is manifestly a circuitous defense, but the best, perhaps, that could be reached under the Edwardean system.

## II

The second issue with which the New England theology had to wrestle was that of determinism versus freedom. This was the battlefield royal. Edwards' determinism, so strongly set forth in his *Treatise on the Will*, left a heavy load for a freedom-loving people to carry. The only relief to Edwards' absolute determinism was his doctrine that while a man is morally unable to choose for himself he has a kind of defunct residual "natural ability," or at least he might have it if he had not sinned in Adam. For a time this doctrine of "natural ability"—although it was an ability which was hardly more than a fiction—served to offset the dead weight of "moral inability." Bellamy, Hopkins, Smalley, and others defended and extended this distinction. Bellamy declared that "the more unable to love God we are the more we are to blame."<sup>2</sup>

The *Treatise on the Will* was recognized as a masterly work. But the New England mind would not endure its determinism—high treason as it was to the consciousness of freedom. Protest after protest was raised against it, some mild and suggestive, others indignant and denunciatory. Among the earlier were James Dana's *Examination* (1770) and Samuel West's *Essays on Liberty and Necessity* (1793). Not only the Arminians, against whom Edwards had directed his *Treatise*, but many of the adherents of orthodoxy joined in this revolt against him. The most notable protest was that of Nathaniel W. Taylor, professor of systematic theology in Yale College.<sup>3</sup> Taylor was no seceder from the New

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel W. Taylor, born in New Milford, Conn., 1786; was graduated at Yale College, 1807; studied theology with President Dwight; pastor of the First Church, New Haven, 1812-22; professor of systematic theology, Yale, 1822-58; died March 10, 1858.

England system, although violent antagonists attempted to brand him as such. He held fast to the cardinal doctrines of Calvinism. Yet "The New Haven theology," which he fathered, proved to be a powerful factor in undermining the New England theology. Taylor rejected emphatically and explicitly the Edwardean doctrine of natural ability, asserting that "the *natural ability of man* to obey God, as defined by Edwards and others, has no existence and can have none. It is an essential nothing." In place of this fiction Taylor declared that the soul possesses "power to the contrary."<sup>1</sup>

Inasmuch as the Unitarians had thrown their full weight against Calvinistic determinism and in behalf of an extreme individualistic freedom, this attack of Taylor upon determinism seemed to ally him with them, in spite of the fact that one of the main objects of his system was to refute Unitarianism. This unholy alliance, as it seemed to the orthodox, greatly prejudiced many against Taylor. Nevertheless "Taylorism" spread near and far. It became a dominating factor in that new center of New England life, Oberlin College, under its first three presidents, Finney, Mahan, and Fairchild. President Finney insisted with characteristic positiveness that under a moral government "sin and holiness must be free and voluntary acts and states of mind."<sup>2</sup> President Mahan in his vigorous little volume, *Doctrine of the Will* (1844), specifically refuted Edwards and strongly upheld liberty. President Fairchild in his *Moral Philosophy* (1869) followed Mahan in appealing to consciousness as a sufficient guaranty of freedom. Meanwhile the protest was still going on in New England. Roland G. Hazard's *Freedom of Mind in Willing* appeared in 1864. In fact, before the last quarter of the nineteenth century American Congregationalism, orthodox as well as Unitarian, had quite fully repudiated Edwards' determinism, although there was here and there a theologian who still endeavored to sustain it.

This inner repudiation of determinism on the part of Congregationalism was aided by the bombardment from without. From

<sup>1</sup> *Moral Government*, II, 134. Professor B. B. Warfield calls Taylor "the Pelagianizer" (see article, "Edwards and the New England Theology," Hastings' *Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*).

<sup>2</sup> *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (1851), Preface, p. viii.

the side of Arminianism *Whedon on the Will* (1864) vigorously attacked it, and Unitarianism delivered against it an unceasing fusillade. With all this battling over the issue of freedom versus determinism it is indicative of the limited range of metaphysical speculation that there was little or no thought of a possible synthesis of the two. Polemics was too much the accepted atmosphere of the time to permit of this.

### III

Nathaniel W. Taylor was a unique and striking figure in American thought and typical of the polemic era. He was an effective controversialist and a very Jove at wielding theological thunderbolts. His stormy strength was felt on every hand. He shook the hoary tree of Edwardean Calvinism, already smitten by Unitarianism, to its roots, leaving it standing (he meant to strengthen it) yet ready to topple over at the mere breath of his dissentient pupil, Horace Bushnell, and his fellows of "the New Theology." Taylor was by no means a philosopher. His ignorance of philosophy—its history, its spirit, and its method—is impressive, as his discussions of the Trinity and his all but sophomoric sermon "What is Truth?"<sup>1</sup> sufficiently attest. Yet he was master of the art of stating obvious but overlooked truths impressively and in making a certain class of distinctions and affirmations which were both opportune and forceful. In this way he came to be the champion of freedom of the will when all about him cowered before a deterministic orthodoxy. For these reasons he stands out as one of the heroes of the New England faith, whom we of their heritage may well canonize—in our Protestant fashion.

Another of the strong and scintillating minds of the New England school was Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840).<sup>2</sup> Born forty-one years earlier than Taylor, he was preaching that the soul is a series of "voluntary exercises" when Taylor began lecturing on moral government at Yale. Emmons was a country pastor, serving for fifty-four years as pastor of the church in Franklin,

<sup>1</sup> See Taylor's *Revealed Theology*, pp. 461 ff. Professor George P. Fisher overlooks this defect in his otherwise just tribute to Dr. Taylor. See *Discussions in History and Theology*, pp. 285 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Henry B. Smith, "The Theological System of Emmons," *Faith and Philosophy*, pp. 215-63.

Mass., which he made a center of large influence. He published no system of theology, but his sermons, published after his death, setting forth a complete system of doctrine gave him a wide reputation and a prominent and permanent place in New England theology.

Emmons' empirical doctrine that the soul consists of a series of "exercises," every one of which is free, in the sense of being voluntary, did not prevent him from making God the author of these exercises. Sin "consists in sinning"; it is therefore man's voluntary action; and yet *God is actually the Efficient Agent of all sinful acts*. Emmons, like Taylor, was an acute reasoner and polemicist but blissfully ignorant of the hampering hesitations and inhibitions begotten of philosophy. In a manner so crystalline as to be easily convincing, and with an unfailing confidence, he set forth the most startling antitheses with no effort whatever to reconcile them. The restless waters of such a mind sparkle, attract, suggest—but one looks into them in vain for the translucent depth of an Edwards or the strength and placidity of a Samuel Hopkins.

Others of the metaphysical theologians of New England were Stephen West (1735–1819), eminent Hopkinsian and defender of Edwardean determinism; Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), moderate Calvinist and persuasive refuter of the prevailing skepticism; and the Andover professors, Leonard Woods (1774–1854), successful exponent of the Hopkinsian–Old Calvinist compromise, which led to the formation of Andover Seminary; and Moses Stuart (1780–1852), scholar and exegete, "the father of biblical learning in this country" and the ablest opponent of Channing.

The last of the chief metaphysicians of the New England school—in some respects the peer of them all—was Edwards A. Park (1808–1900), professor of systematic theology at Andover from 1847 to 1881.<sup>1</sup> Professor Park was above all the logician, building up his system block by block, each resting so securely on the last that if the foundation had only been sufficiently broad and true, and if theology were a science that would submit its

<sup>1</sup> See the chapter devoted to Professor Park in Foster's *History of New England Theology*.

profound truths to such treatment, the structure might be standing still. Not that theology has not within it a pervasive and unifying logic, but it is a logic subtler, profounder, and yet in some respects simpler, than entered into the mind of Professor Park to conceive. He too was no philosopher. He was no provincial, having studied in Germany, but he had not the philosophic temper. He took up Kant—and dropped him. His was the legal rather than the Platonic mind. And yet he had imagination as well as humor. In that truly magnificent and memorable sermon, preached in 1850 before the Massachusetts Convention, "The Theology of the Intellect and That of the Feelings," he rose to a vision of religious truth far transcending his classroom lectures. The latter, by the limitations of the system which he strove to sustain, were confined to the same treadmill, trod in patience and with far less opportunity to escape into larger liberty, by the New England theologians as a whole.

#### IV

To return to the problems with which the New England metaphysical theologians were engaged. The third main issue which Edwards left to his successors was distinctly ethical as well as metaphysical—the reconciliation of an infinitely high ideal of virtue with the doctrine of the total depravity of human nature.

Edwards' two irreconcilable treatises, *The Nature of True Virtue* and *Original Sin*, left man with an ideal of incomparable "excellence" before him, yet impotent to attain it and without a particle of moral soundness, with neither rights nor worth nor capacity of his own, and uncertain whether God would ever lift him out of his fallen estate. In accordance with this Edwardean conception of the requirements of true virtue Samuel Hopkins put forth, as the test of fitness for the ministry, the famous dictum, willingness to be damned for the glory of God, which elicited from one candidate the classic response that he was not sure about himself but he was willing that the ordaining council should be. Why this lofty pitch of virtue should be expected of such impotent and corrupt creatures, incased in original sin, and without an atom of freedom, none of these theologians were able to say.



This radical denial of the right of any consideration whatever for one's self, in the interest of divine grace, was more than even the New England piety could endure. Samuel Hopkins himself, in spite of his insistence upon the renunciation of selfhood and upon willingness to be damned, made a place for a certain kind of self-recognition which he refused to call *self-love*, but which actually gave a foothold, in the exercise of benevolence, for the individual to pay some respect to himself. In the chapter on "Disinterested Affection" in his *System of Divinity* he wrote as follows:

By many there is not a proper distinction made, and kept in view between self-love and that regard which the benevolent person must have for himself and his interest and happiness, which is necessarily included in disinterested affection. Disinterested, impartial benevolence to being in general that is capable of good and happiness, regards and wishes well to every being and creature in the system, according to the degree of his existence, worth and capacity of happiness, so far as all this comes into the view of the benevolent person, and so far as the good and happiness of each is, or appears to be consistent with the greatest good of the whole. And as he himself is one individual part of the whole, he must of necessity be the object of this disinterested impartial benevolence, and his own interest and happiness must be regarded and desired, as much as that of his neighbors, or any individual of the whole society, not because it is *himself*, but because he is included in the whole, and his happiness is worth as much, and is as desirable as that of his neighbor, other circumstances being equal. This is not self-love, but the same universal, disinterested, impartial public benevolence which wishes well to being in general and therefore to himself, because he has an existence and is one among the rest, and equal to his neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

## V

This interpretation of the marginal bearings of disinterested benevolence relieves it of much of its superhuman rigorism and opened the way for the development of a system of morals at once lofty and reasonable. Without attempting to trace the intermediate steps, including N. W. Taylor's approach to eudaemonism and its rebuke by the Oberlin divines, it may suffice to point out how the benevolence theory of virtue reached its climax in the well-known volume by President Mark Hopkins, great-nephew of Samuel Hopkins, *The Law of Love and Love as a Law* (1868). In this volume the Edwardean doctrine takes on a modern aspect.

<sup>1</sup> *System of Divinity*, I, 547-48.

Love is substituted for benevolence, although the conception is substantially the same. Indeed, one is reminded of the very atmosphere and phraseology of the older writers in such a statement as this:

Moral Law is an affirmation through the Moral Reason of obligation to choose the supreme end for which God made us, that is, to choose the good of all beings capable of good, our own included, and to put forth all those volitions which may be required to attain or secure those ends.<sup>1</sup>

Yet while this loyal but emancipated son of the New England fathers propounds his theory of virtue in fundamental accord with the main principle of Edwards' *Nature of True Virtue*, he freely casts aside its extravagances. The touch is fresh and firm, the language clear and simple, the whole discussion keeps close to life and reality.

In one respect Mark Hopkins' *The Law of Love* breaks completely with, or perhaps we should say transcends, the Edwardean conception of man. In place of Edwards' disparagement of humanity, emphasis upon original sin, and denial of all natural worth, we have here a hopeful and dignifying representation of human worth and affections. Edwards disparaged, as "not belonging to true virtue," all "private" love for self or others which is not subordinated to and does not spring from a *supreme love to God*. President Hopkins admits no such distinction, although he recognizes the difference between love as a principle and love as a mere feeling of attraction. Love is one, whether the moral nature is first stirred toward God or toward man.<sup>2</sup>

The "self-love" whose nature and defects Edwards had analyzed so mercilessly and against which Samuel Hopkins had warned so earnestly as "the root and essence of all sin,"<sup>3</sup> is here given a legitimate and honored place. And yet it is not the kind of self-love which Edwards and Samuel Hopkins condemned. Evidently they did not distinguish clearly between self-love and selfishness. The following passage from *Love as a Law* clarifies the whole matter:

Self-love is legitimate. Our own good is of intrinsic value, and we are especially bound to care for it as it is that part of the universal good which

<sup>1</sup> P. 89, first edition.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> *System of Divinity*, I, 549.

is more especially intrusted to us. God cares for it, and why not we? In doing this we have reason to believe that we not only work with Him for our own good, but as He himself works. "From hence, also, it is evident," says Edwards, in his *Treatise on the Nature of Virtue*, "that the divine virtue, or the virtue of the divine mind, must consist principally in love to himself." If this be correct, our virtue will consist in some degree in love to ourselves. While, therefore, we allow self-love a place in prompting efforts for our own perfection, it is a subordinate one. . . . To love God and our neighbor is the best way of loving ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

This is bold treatment to give to the words of the father of the New England theology. One questions if he would approve of it. Yet the modern mind feels that "this confidence which we have in Him" is nearer the Christian conception of God than that abject abasement before Him which the New England fathers came too near mistaking for reverence. It is a far cry from Mark Hopkins to Walt Whitman, still farther from Samuel Hopkins; but one need strain no moral nerve to find much of the essence of their doctrine of benevolence in that line of the hobo mystic,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.<sup>2</sup>

Absolved of its needless dishonoring of human nature, the doctrine of virtue as benevolence is the noblest and most enduring element of the New England theology. It reflects truly and constructively the spirit of Christianity. It is noble, comprehensive, Christian. It represents the greatest qualities of the New England Puritan mind, its surreptitious optimism as well as its superb devotion to duty and to God. A little reflection shows how truly the benevolence doctrine of virtue reflects the spirit and teaching of Christ. Christianity does not weaken the categorical imperative or deny that duty involves a stern sense of *oughtness*; but it does disclose the *purpose* and *meaning* of duty. It does not leave the conscience shivering under a cold weight of impersonal obligation, but reveals why it is right to do right. It transforms blind obedience into the intelligent pursuit of an end; it lifts duty into the light of love, of "universal benevolence," which is grounded in the worth of sentient, and above all, of personal being. It exalts personality. Indeed, personality appears in President

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself."

Hopkins' book—as it had already begun to appear in the writings of the Oberlin school and elsewhere—as a “condition” without which obligation cannot exist. From this time on, in ethics and philosophy and theology, personality becomes clearer and clearer as an illuminating principle in the understanding of both God and man.

## VI

This brief survey of the New England theology will suffice to show by contrast how far our modern theology has withdrawn from the metaphysical realm. American theology, in common with that of Europe, has in the present century taken the direction of historical investigation and interpretation, until at present it has almost lost its metaphysical character. This change of direction has on the whole been beneficent. It has led to a great advance in theological science. Yet while no one would wish to return to the type of metaphysics of the New England theologians, it is to the loss of theology that the metaphysical interest has so largely disappeared from its horizon. This deficiency is an inevitable source of weakness and provincialism. In looking back upon the stalwart and exalted minds who dignified their profession, walking with steady step the dizzy heights of metaphysical speculation in the palmy days of the New England theology, one cannot but feel their power, even while he recognizes how strained and disproportionate was their scholasticism. The New England theology was strangely out of touch with life. Its contact with the current of religious experience was almost broken; and yet its instinct was a true one. The intellect has its rights—large rights—in theology; and it will be well for American theology if, in turning back in this year of the Pilgrim tercentenary toward the New England divines, it recovers, in a more normal way, something of their profound interest in the metaphysical presuppositions and issues of the Christian faith.